



## North America

CHECKERBOARD SQUARE  
ST. LOUIS, MO 63164-0001, USA  
TEL. 314 982 1000  
FAX 314 982 2752

### **Purina Statement for The Record on The Urgent Need for More Trained Service Dogs For Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS)**

(Submitted April 12, 2021 to the Subcommittee on Health, Committee on Veterans Affairs)

As the Chief H.R. Officer at Nestlé Purina PetCare, and a proud U.S. Army veteran, I welcome this opportunity to submit a written statement for the record for the April 15, 2021 legislative hearing of the Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health. As global leaders in pet nutrition and care for more than 90 years, Purina and our Dog Chow brand are committed to helping raise awareness of the urgent need for more trained service dogs for veterans living with post-traumatic stress (PTS).

Purina associates are driven by the fundamental belief that pets and people are better together. We are passionate about promoting the human-animal bond and the important roles dogs and cats play in providing mental and physical health benefits to families and individuals, including post-combat veterans. For many veterans living with PTS, a trained service dog can make a life-changing difference, but the demand today far surpasses the supply of properly trained dogs to assist veterans. For this reason, Purina Dog Chow partnered with expert dog trainers at service dog organizations, and three years ago launched the “Service Dog Salute” Campaign to help raise awareness and provide more trained service dogs for veterans with PTS. Purina also supports the bipartisan H.R. 1448, the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) for Veterans Therapy Act, and we encourage its swift passage by the House and Senate.

We will focus our statement here around the following four key points: how trained service dogs can make a difference for veterans, the urgent need for more trained service dogs, how we partner with experts in specialized dog training, and why we support H.R. 1448, the PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act.

1. **Properly trained psychiatric service dogs can make a life-changing difference for veterans living with PTS.** New research continues to demonstrate that trained psychiatric service dogs can make a life-changing difference for veterans living with PTS. Research released in March, 2021 by the Veteran’s Administration indicates that pairing properly trained service dogs with veterans resulted in less symptoms of PTS and less risk of suicide ([VA Study Shows Service Dogs Impact Veterans with PTSD Canine Companions® applauds expansion of VA insurance benefits for Veterans](#)). The VA study indicates that pairing veterans with PTS with a properly trained service dog is an effective form of treatment for mental health and living with PTS. Prior research conducted by Kaiser Permanente and Purdue University (<https://www.vet.purdue.edu/chab/ohaire/PTSD.php>) has also shown a reduction in PTS symptoms and depression, leading to better interpersonal relationships, lower risk of substance abuse, and overall better mental health.

Importantly, these psychiatric service dogs are not the same as emotional support or companion dogs. Like service dogs for the blind, deaf and physically disabled, psychiatric service dogs for veterans must be specifically trained to help their handler perform tasks they cannot otherwise perform on their own. The training process can take from one to two-and-a-half years to learn to perform tasks such as:

- Placing body weight on the veteran to promote a sense of calm during panic attacks
- Waking the veteran from upsetting dreams or night terrors
- Reminding the veteran to take medications
- Alerting the veteran when someone is approaching from behind
- Patrolling the perimeter of a room for triggers and threats

2. **The need is urgent to increase the number of properly trained psychiatric service dogs for veterans.** It is estimated that post-traumatic stress impacts between 20 and 30 percent of veterans, and tragically, nearly 18 service members take their own lives each day according to the VA Suicide Prevention Annual Report. And while a trained service dog can make a life-saving difference for many of these veterans, it is estimated by one service dog organization that less than 1% of applicants in need of a service dog can obtain one in a given year. Cost and time of the training, and awareness of the need, are key factors. Properly training a service dog can cost over \$20,000 on average for one dog, and as noted earlier, training can take from one to two-and-a-half years. Purina believes the solution will require a multi-pronged approach, including increasing awareness of this important issue, passing VA pilot programs such as the one proposed in H.R. 1448, the PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act, and more public-private partnerships such as the Purina Dog Chow “Service Dog Salute” Campaign described next.

3. **How Purina is partnering with experts in specialized dog training to meet the unique needs of post-combat veterans.** Purina is a Military Friendly Employer and we are proud to recruit, hire and train military veterans. In 2018, our Purina Dog Chow Brand saw the need to help train more service dogs for veterans and launched the “Service Dog Salute” Campaign. Through this program, we’ve seen firsthand the important lifesaving difference a trained service dog can make in healing the lives of veterans and their families. Our campaign continues, and over the last three years, we’ve donated more than \$735,000 to support the training of more service dogs for military veterans, and we created a brief video on our website to share how actual veterans have benefitted from trained service dogs: [www.dogchow.com/service](http://www.dogchow.com/service)

An important component of the “Service Dog Salute” is our partnership with two outstanding non-profit organizations who bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise in what it takes to properly train and pair a service dog with a military veteran:

- **Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF).** Based in California, ARF’s Pets & Vets program involves training dogs rescued from pet shelters to be matched with a veteran to help “save both ends of the leash.” <https://www.arflife.org/pets-and-vets>
- **Got Your Six Support Dogs.** Based in Illinois, Got Your Six is committed to providing specialized service dogs to veterans and first responders to “regain their lives through the healing power of dogs.” <https://gotyoursixsupportdogs.org/>

**4. Support for H.R. 1448, the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) for Veterans**

**Therapy Act.** We are proud to support H.R. 1448, and have worked with staff for Representative Steve Stivers (OH 15<sup>th</sup>) to promote this bipartisan bill and encourage its passage. We believe this legislation recognizes the urgent need for more specially trained service dogs, and it would create a pilot program in the Veterans Administration to give veterans access to treatment derived from working with service dogs. We note that the bill passed with unanimous consent in the House during the last Congress and was recently reintroduced in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress with broad bipartisan support.

In summary, the data shows that trained psychiatric service dogs can make a life-changing difference for veterans with PTS. While there is an urgent need for pairing more trained service dogs with veterans in need, the good news is there are organizations like Tony LaRussa's ARF and Got Your Six Support Dogs, along with many others, that have a proven track record in properly training dogs to help veterans heal and recover from PTS.

This issue is very important to our nation's veterans, and it's very important to Purina and to me, personally. We are happy to be a resource if we may answer questions or provide additional insights. On behalf of Purina and our 8,000 proud U.S. associates, we appreciate this opportunity to provide this written statement on behalf of the men and women in uniform who have served our nation proudly and selflessly.

Sincerely,



Steve Degnan  
Chief H.R. Officer, U.S. Army Veteran  
Nestlé Purina PetCare  
1 Checkerboard Square  
St. Louis, MO 63164  
[Steve.degnan@purina.nestle.com](mailto:Steve.degnan@purina.nestle.com)

Cc: [bill.etling@purina.nestle.com](mailto:bill.etling@purina.nestle.com)  
Cc: [bill.salzman@purina.nestle.com](mailto:bill.salzman@purina.nestle.com)  
Cc: [Emily.goldkamp@purina.nestle.com](mailto:Emily.goldkamp@purina.nestle.com)  
Cc: [megan.villarreal@us.nestle.com](mailto:megan.villarreal@us.nestle.com)